

American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Research Center: Research and Training Opportunities

Presented by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families

Chair: Anne Bergan

Presenters: Paul Spicer, Marjorie Bezdek, Michelle L. Christensen Sarche

Bergan: Research into American Indian/Alaska Native/ Early Childhood Head Start communities lags behind research of other Head Start populations. This is especially true in early childhood development and intervention. The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation conducted activities, including literature review and listening sessions, in several American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start communities. A wealth of information, insight, and feedback was gained, and future opportunities to be provided were determined. The next step in the process is to fund an American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start Research Center. Last year, an announcement was provided for a cooperative agreement, and The University of Colorado at Denver received the award.

Spicer: The American Indian/Alaska Native programs at the University of Colorado are well into the third decade of work and partnership with tribal communities to address concerns related to the health and well being of the native people of this country. Previous research conducted by the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center and Early Head Start has concluded that traditional values and educational accomplishments are not incompatible. Separate analyses have emphasized that a mother's American Indian ethnic identity has a positive impact on her child's social and emotional development. Ways of encouraging development in both areas should be further explored.

Another study called the Parenting Project sought to understand the impact of mothers' experiences growing up on the relationship between herself and her child and her child's development. Through periodic interviews with 78 mothers, the study found that first-time mothers saw pregnancy as a window of opportunity to reflect on past difficulties and to make positive changes in their lives for the betterment of the child's development. They also identified education as an important factor in their children having a better life.

The core commitment of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center is to develop partnerships that can sustain long-term research and address the needs of American Indian/Alaska Native children and their families in the context of Head Start and Early Head Start Research. Over half of the direct costs of this project are sent out to other places through the Center, which will provide technical assistance and support for executing the research. Steering committees have guided the development of areas of research emphasis, but the primary role of the Center is to support other people in doing the work.

The center is organized around a steering committee, which is composed of program directors and researchers of early childhood issues. An internal executive committee, composed of the University of Colorado and partners, and the Academy for Educational Development, is currently providing technical assistance to American Indian grantees in Head Start.

One of the reasons for a dearth of literature on early childhood in American Indian/Alaska Native communities is the overall dearth of research in American Indian/Alaska Native communities. Some models have been developed to train the next generation of investigators, and the techniques should be applied to early childhood research. An elaborate set of procedures has been built for providing technical assistance to the people who will be conduct research through the Center. All research is conducted with community consultation and approval. Community members regularly review measures. Most data collection is done locally. Ongoing community engagement leads to new proposals. All presentations and publications are reviewed.

The goals of The American Indian/Alaska Native Programs at the University of Colorado are to identify existing data on American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start, to locate gaps in the available literature and reporting on the programs, to generate policy-relevant findings, to give shape to research and training priorities, and to build a national network of programs for future research efforts.

The other implicit goal in developing a national data collection is to mobilize American Indian/Alaska Native programs for participation on large national data collections. The Administration for Children and Families has provided some funds for research. The goal is to build a network of programs that are interested in participating in data collection and developing research partnerships between researchers, and then programs.

Bezdek: The steering committee includes researchers and American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start program directors. It intends to provide direction to all Center efforts. Strong representation from practice and research determine the course taken by the Center. It is a cooperative agreement. The steering committee will be supplemented once trainers and projects are in place. The other half of the infrastructure for the Center is the internal executive committee, which consist of the directors from American Indian/Alaska Native programs, University of Colorado, and partners from Washington, DC.

Sarche: Research training opportunities will be available through the Center, and information about training and research grants is available at <http://www.uchsc.edu>. Research training will involve mentorship, seminars, and pilot studies. The other project will be original data collection. The exact details of the training plan are still being developed.

Spicer: The four areas of emphasis were articulated in the original application. The needs of children and families in American Indian/Alaska Native communities are the first area of emphasis. The second area of emphasis is the needs of staff in American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start programs and early Head Start programs. Classroom practices, developing a better understanding of what is actually occurring in the classroom and how it is being implemented, the challenges to implementation, are the third area. The fourth emphasis is on proper and appropriate child outcomes assessments in American Indian Head Start and Early Head Start.